

Black Ecology and Critical Environmental Justice

Michael Warren Murphy,¹ George Weddington, and AJ Rio-Glick

ABSTRACT

How do we make sense of—and adequately strive against or put an end to—the socioecological violence that so tenaciously adheres to black life? In response to this question, this essay contributes to the collective endeavor toward a black (radical) ecology, as an ever-necessary and ever-evolving knowledge and practice of insurgency. More specifically, we take the opportunity we reflect upon what David N. Pellow identifies as the pillars of critical environmental justice studies to find resonance with strains of black thought that are explicitly concerned with antiblack violence.

Keywords: race, black ecology, antiblack violence, black studies, critical environmental justice

INTRODUCTION

FROM THE NIGER RIVER DELTA saturated in deadly petrochemicals to the water crises of Rio's favelas. From the streets where yet another young person is slain by gunfire to the cobalt mines in the Congo where children toil beside adults. From the neighborhoods adjacent to U.S. Steel Corporation facilities in Braddock and Clairton (Pennsylvania) that are suffocating in industrial effluent to the islands of the Caribbean facing another, more intense hurricane season while still recovering from the last. From perilous oceanic voyage, whether slave or migrant ship, to the captivity of a cell in a prison built atop a coal ash dump. How do we make sense of—and adequately strive against or put an end to—the socioecological violence that so tenaciously adheres to black life?

FURTHER TOWARD BLACK ECOLOGY

More than 50 years ago, amidst growing concerns about environmental problems, Nathan Hare published an essay titled, "Black Ecology," in which he argued that it was imperative that we come to "understand how both the physical and social environments of blacks and whites have increasingly evolved as contrast."¹ Since then, after decades of research exploring the socio-environmental dynamics that Hare suggested needed further attention, as with environmental justice (EJ; or inequality) studies, thinkers within and beyond the academy have returned to the notion of black ecology.² For instance, J.T. Roane and Justin Hosbey invoke

¹Nathan Hare. "Black Ecology." *The Black Scholar* 1 (1970): 2–8.

²See J.T. Roane and Justin Hosbey. "Mapping Black Ecologies." *Current Research in Digital History* 2 (2019). Whereas K.D. Wilson points to the necessity of a Black radical ecology to "save ourselves and the planet" by opposing "all forms of (white) authority, in order to abolish the imposition of the 'Man's' will or material interests upon us all." See K.D. Wilson, "Who's Man is This? Black Radical Ecology and the Anthropogenic Question." (2020). <https://redvoice.news/black_radical_ecology_and_the_anthropogenic_question>. (Last accessed January 27, 2021). Chelsea M. Frazier has also written about Black ecology but from a Black feminist standpoint. See Chelsea M. Frazier. "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2 (2016): 40–72.

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“Black ecology” to at once name the ongoing reality of black and African diasporic vulnerability to dangerous environmental conditions, such as climate change, as well as “the corpus of insurgent knowledge produced by these same communities.”

As an insurgent interdisciplinary knowledge formation, black ecology aims to understand and radically transform the socioecological dynamics that imperil black life. Yet, at the same time, we fear that the contributions of sociologists with trans- or interdisciplinary proclivities—much like Nathan Hare, who was a sociologist, psychologist, and black studies scholar-activist—are too easily missed in recent discourse. For example, Dorceta Taylor, Robert Bullard, Beverly Wright, Kishi Animashaun Ducre, Monica M. White, and David N. Pellow, among others, have all made vital contributions to black ecological thought from the realm of environmental sociology and EJ studies.³ At the same time, it is equally as important to acknowledge the critical insights that only black studies can provide for thinking about the matters of black life.

Thus, in this essay, we take the opportunity to bring black studies, environmental sociology, and EJ studies into closer conversation as a practice in black ecological thought. More specifically, we reflect upon what David N. Pellow identifies as the pillars of critical EJ studies to find resonance with strains of black thought that are explicitly concerned with antiblack violence. Overall, the pillars of critical EJ (CEJ) serve as both a provocation and a set of onto-epistemological and axiological propositions (or metatheory) that can and should inform the confluence of thought and practice that is black ecology. To this end, in the following, we consider how

the pillars of CEJ resonate with recent theoretical preoccupations in black studies.⁴

Socioecological dimensions of antiblack violence

In his most recent book, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, Pellow writes about various topics that have not received as much attention by scholars concerned with EJ, including the Israel/Palestine conflict, prisons and carcerality, and state-sanctioned violence against black people.⁵ Most importantly, in this text, Pellow elaborates upon what he calls CEJ as a (meta)theoretical framework that pushes beyond specific tensions and limitations of earlier approaches to EJ research and praxis. For instance, as Pellow points out, earlier study on EJ was limited by a concern with one or two categories of social difference, such as race and class, to the neglect of gender, sexuality, and species. EJ has also tended to focus on a single scale, instead of contending with the complex spatial and temporal scales at which EJ struggles play out. Moreover, Pellow questions the extent to which EJ scholars and activists should look to the state to facilitate the socioenvironmental change that movements demand. Finally, earlier EJ research has been limited by failing to examine and theorize the expendability of human and nonhuman populations that face socioenvironmental threats. For every limitation or tension that Pellow identifies in past approaches to EJ research, he offers a conceptual counterbalance in the form of his four pillars of CEJ.

How might the underlying principles of CEJ help to think about the socioecological dimensions of antiblack violence? In response to this question, we extend Pellow’s considerations of the Black Lives Matter movement as an EJ challenge by placing the pillars of CEJ in conversation with critical strains of black studies.⁶ By bringing black studies and critical EJ studies into dialogue, we hope to contribute to the project of black ecology, without claiming to exhaust the possibilities.

Intersectionality

Given that EJ research has often been limited by a preoccupation with one or two axes of social difference (i.e., race and class), Pellow argues that the first pillar of critical EJ is the “recognition that social inequality and oppression in all forms intersect, and that actors in the more-than-human world are subjects of oppression and frequently agents of social change.”⁷ From this point of

³Dorceta E. Taylor. *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600-1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Dorceta E. Taylor. *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*. (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Dorceta E. Taylor. *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016); Robert D. Bullard. *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices From the Grassroots*. (Boston: South End Press, 1993); Robert D. Bullard. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994); Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright. *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009); Kishi Ducre. *A Place We Call Home*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013); Monica M. White. *Freedom Farmers*. (UNC Press Books, 2018). David N. Pellow. *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002); David N. Pellow. *Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007); David N. Pellow. *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Radical Earth Movement*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁴Our use of the word “resonance” is quite intentional as we have been inspired by the practice of Black study as ensemble or chorus. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. (NY: Minor Compositions, 2013).

⁵David N. Pellow. *What is Critical Environmental Justice*. (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA, USA: Polity Press, 2018).

⁶David N. Pellow. “Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies: Black Lives Matter as an Environmental Justice Challenge.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13 (2016): 221–36.

⁷Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 18.

view, all forms of inequality—colonialism, racism, cis-heteropatriarchy, classism, nativism, ableism, ageism, speciesism, imperialism, and so on—are intersecting axes of domination.

Although intersectionality is rooted in black feminist social theory,⁸ one possible source of tension (or dissonance) emerges when considering antiblack ecological violence from this principle of CEJ revolves around what some thinkers in black studies have called “people of color blindness.” Whereas sociologists like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva point to how colorblind ideology perpetuates racial inequality,⁹ Jared Sexton suggests that there is a form of colorblindness inherent in the very idea of “people of color,” as it can obscure the “specificity of antiblackness” while “presum[ing] or insist[ing] upon the monolithic victimization under white supremacy.”¹⁰ In other words, there is a tendency within black studies to challenge prevailing discourse that reduces antiblack violence to a problem of racism, no matter how systemic or institutionalized, because when we fail to comprehend the specificity of antiblackness, we simultaneously misunderstand black suffering in the modern world.¹¹

A defining feature of black life is the incessant exposure to gratuitous violence that black people must contend with in the modern world. João H. Costa Vargas elaborates further:

Gratuitous violence constitutes a state of terror that coexists with liberal laws, rights, and citizenship. Gratuitous violence is terror because it is unpredictable in its predictability, or predictable in its unpredictability. For a black person, it is not a matter of whether she is going to be randomly brutalized; it is a matter of when.¹²

Thinking about antiblack violence in these terms necessitates reckoning with slavery, and its afterlife—“skewed life chances, limited access to health and edu-

cation, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”¹³ For, as the constellation of theorists associated with the Afropessimist perspective in contemporary black thought maintain, slavery “is the underlying algorithm of antiblackness.”¹⁴ Here, drawing from Orlando Patterson’s extensive comparative-historical analysis, slavery is understood as a relation of domination defined by three constitutive elements: raw violence, general dishonor, and natal alienation.¹⁵ For this reason, the slave is not merely understood as chattel or coerced laborer, but rather as a socially dead nonperson, whose very existence is open for the enjoyment of others.

In sum, contemporary currents of thought in black studies insist that we understand antiblackness as irreducible to racial inequality or discrimination.¹⁶ Chattel slavery not only formed the bedrock of racial domination, but along with Indigenous dispossession and elimination, constituted a racial-colonial and ecological order imbued with violence.¹⁷ Thus, on a very material level, slavery manifested antiblackness as a structuring element of the modern world that predisposes the people occupying the fraught positionality of blackness—considered coterminous with slaveness—to gratuitous, noncontingent, uninterrupted, normative, and predictable violence.

All of this seems to complicate the application of the CEJ pillar of intersectionality to understanding the environmental matters of black life, in at least two senses. First, when it comes to intersecting oppressions, racism alone cannot adequately capture the socio-environmental suffering of black people.¹⁸ Moreover, and second, we must contend with the fact that black people, because of slavery and social death, have never been considered “human,” which further complicates the category of species, and the system of domination designated as speciesism. In this regard, we can understand that black people suffer the same sort of figurative openness endemic to the commodity, which is something that nonhuman species also contend with against the

⁸Kishi Animashaun Ducre. “The Black Feminist Spatial Imagination and an Intersectional Environmental Justice.” *Environmental Sociology* 4 (2018): 22–35; Kimberle Crenshaw. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1990): 1241; Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York: Routledge, 2000). However, it is also important to point out that recent interventions by Sirma Bilge, Jennifer C. Nash and Patrice Douglass articulate within the concept by reconsidering both intersectionality and gender through a framework of antiblackness: Sirma Bilge. “The Fungibility of Intersectionality: An Afropessimist Reading.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43 (2020): 2298–2326; Jennifer C. Nash. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 20–21; Patrice D. Douglass. “Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying.” *Theory & Event* 21 (2018): 106–123.

⁹Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰Jared Sexton. “People-of-color-blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery.” *Social Text* 28 (2010), 48.

¹¹Frank B. Wilderson III. *Afropessimism*. (New York: Live-right Publishing, 2020).

¹²João Helion Costa Vargas. *The Denial of Antiblackness: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 34.

¹³Saidiya V. Hartman. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

¹⁴Vargas. *The Denial of Antiblackness*, 35.

¹⁵Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁶Sabine Broeck. “Inequality or (Social) Death.” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016).

¹⁷Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy. “Predatory Value Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities.” *Social Text* 36 (2018): 1–18. See also Tiffany Lethabo King. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith, eds. *New World Grammars: The “unthought” Black Discourses of Conquest*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 77–93; Denise Ferreira da Silva. “Reading the Dead: A Black Feminist Poethical Reading of Global Capital.” In: Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith, eds. *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Antiblackness*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 37–51.

¹⁸Willie Jamaal Wright. “As Above, So Below: Anti-Black Violence as Environmental Racism.” *Antipode* 53 (2018): 791–809.

human and its dominion.¹⁹ Stated differently, as Claire Jean Kim asserts in her meditation on the controversy surrounding the murder of the gorilla Harambe, “Blackness and animality, then, form poles in a closed loop of meaning. Blackness is a species construct (meaning ‘in proximity to the animal’), and animality is a racial construct (meaning ‘in proximity to the black’), and the two are dynamically interconstituted all the way down. In this sense, the antiblack social order that props up the ‘human’ is also a zoological order, or what we might call a zoology-racial order.”²⁰

Multiscalarity

The second pillar of critical EJ studies is informed by a commitment to methodological and theoretical approaches that are multiscalar. Informed by the underlying principle of multiscalarity, CEJ research emphasizes and aims to comprehend “the complex spatial and temporal causes, consequences, and possible resolutions of EJ struggles.”²¹ This commitment to understanding the temporal and spatial dimensions of scale is ultimately about registering the deep ecological entanglements of (earthly) existence.

If we take seriously the notion that understanding antiblack violence necessitates reckoning with slavery, then the multiscalar approach of CEJ will only serve to bolster the attempt to make sense of environmental suffering of black people. Scale matters in both the spatial and temporal sense, but also transpatially and transtemporally, because of the seemingly transcendental character of antiblackness.²² Understanding the environmental injustices that black people contend with at a global scale requires us to confront slavery not as something of the past, but an ongoing structural element of black existence.²³

In her meditation on black life in the wake of slavery, Christina Sharpe writes about how we tend to imagine slavery as “a singular event even as it changed over time and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond.”²⁴ She continues, “But slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances...In what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is pervasive as climate.”²⁵ Taking

this a step further with CEJ, we might also consider how antiblackness is implicated in global socioecological change, as does Ta-Nehesi Coates when he writes:

Something more fierce than Marcus Garvey is riding on the whirlwind. Something more awful than all our African ancestors is rising with the seas. The two phenomena are known to each other. It was the cotton that passed through our chained hands that inaugurated this age. It is the flight from us that sent them sprawling into the subdivided woods. And the methods of transport through these new subdivisions, across the sprawl, is the automobile, the noose around the neck of the earth, and ultimately, the Dreamers themselves.²⁶

Horizontality (anarchism) and indispensability

EJ researchers and activists tend to share “a consensus that they are looking to the state and its legal systems to deliver justice, to police itself, and to regulate industry.”²⁷ Therefore, the third pillar of CEJ is the view that social hierarchies, from racism to speciesism, are not aberrations of the liberal humanist democratic social order, but rather deeply entrenched within it. Moreover, these entrenched modes of power are reinforced by the state. Resting on what we might call a principle of horizontality or anarchism, CEJ is thus concerned with “articulating, developing, and supporting practices, relationships, and institutions that *deepen direct democracy*,” instead of looking to the state to save us.²⁸

Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson argue that “Blackness is anti-state just as the state is anti-Black. The oppression of Black people ought not to inspire the modification of this existing state or the aspiration to create a purportedly better state.”²⁹ This need to look beyond the state has been a hallmark of the black radicalism, from the insurrectionary movements of the enslaved and the maroon communities they forged with other colonized and dispossessed groups across the Americas to individual and collective acts of flight and more subtle acts of everyday resistance.³⁰ Despite appeals and gestures for inclusion, with black heads of (empire-)states and environmental protection agencies with explicit mandates for EJ, black study and praxis points to the need for unraveling the dominant mode of socioecological organization altogether.³¹ “All because what it means to be a society, a commune, a swarm, a

¹⁹Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 296.

²⁰Claire Jean Kim. “Murder and Mattering in Harambe’s House.” *Politics and Animals* 3 (2017), 10. This argument is similar to what Pellow refers to as the social discourse of animality. See also Zakkiyah Iman Jackson. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. (NY: NYU Press, 2020).

²¹Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 22.

²²Vargas. *The Denial of Antiracism*, 25.

²³Michael Warren Murphy. “Notes Toward an Anticolonial Environmental Sociology of Race.” *Environmental Sociology* 2 (2020): 122–133.

²⁴Christina Sharpe. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 106.

²⁵Sharpe. *In the Wake*, 106.

²⁶Ta-Nehesi Coates. *Between the World and Me*. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 151.

²⁷Pellow. *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 24.

²⁸Pellow. *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 24.

²⁹Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson. *As Black as Resistance*. (Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2018).

³⁰Neil Roberts. *Freedom as Marronage*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); W.E.B. Du Bois. *The World and Africa*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Saidiya V. Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³¹Modibo Kadalie. *Pan-African Social Ecology: Speeches, Conversations, and Essays*. (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority!, 2019).

togetherness is to live in the groove of the anarcho-: needing nothing but wanting to share; answering to no one but responding to all,” as Marquis Bey writes.³² Or as Saidiya Hartman suggests with her invocation of the waywardness “the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies; it is lived experience of enclosure and segregation, assembling and huddling together.”³³ We view this anarchic, fugitive, errant, and wayward reorientation of social and ecological configurations as necessarily linked with the notion of indispensability, or the fourth pillar of CEJ.

Whereas earlier EJ research has mostly failed to adequately theorize the expendability of certain human and nonhuman groups, CEJ pivots on what Pellow terms “indispensability,” a principle that suggests that the dominated, human or otherwise, “must not be viewed as *expendable* but rather as *indispensable* to our collective futures.”³⁴ This fourth pillar of CEJ provides an ethical foundation for alternative modes of sociality that recognize how entangled our existence is. In Pellow’s words, “Socially, politically, philosophically, and ecologically, what this means is that we are all linked in webs of interdependence, so that what happens to one group affects, in some way, all others.”³⁵

Although the notion of indispensability is crucial to horizontal modes of sociality, it has also been central to abolitionist strains of black thought and organizing. In this vein, Angela Davis writes that the prison “functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.”³⁶ In other words, the people caught in the prison industrial complex are rendered expendable or disposable. Hence, seeking an end to this vast institutional arrangement, which disproportionately affects black people, is to organize according to the principle of indispensability.

In short, black studies have consistently sought to challenge modes of thought and action that are deeply invested in the captivity of (black) life and that (re)produce alienation from our human and more-than-human relatives, and even the earth itself. This is precisely what Sylvia Wynter was onto when she wrote an open letter to her colleagues in the aftermath of the brutalization of Rodney King and the riots that followed that called for “a new frontier of knowledge able to move us toward a new, correlated human species, and eco-systemic, ethic.”³⁷ This is

precisely what Denise Ferreira da Silva offers with her notion of “difference without separability,” which poses the question, “What if, instead of the Ordered World, we imaged each existant (human and more-than-human) not as separate forms relating through the mediation of forces, but rather as singular expressions of each and every other existant as well as of the entangled whole in/as which they exist?”³⁸

CONCLUSION

We conclude by returning to the question with which we started: How do we make sense of—and adequately strive against or put an end to—the socioecological violence that so tenaciously adheres to black life? In this brief essay, we have suggested that black ecology carries much promise toward this end. Our contribution has been to bring the pillars of critical EJ into conversation with black studies, but we have admittedly only scratched the surface. However, by assembling these various currents of thought in one place, we hope that this brief essay will at least urge scholars and activists toward a more critical understanding of the relationship between blackness, ecology, and EJ. When informed by critical EJ and black study, black ecology represents an important step in this direction.

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³²Marquis Bey. *Anarcho-Blackness: Notes Toward a Black Anarchism*. (Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020).

³³Saidiya Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. (New York, NY: L. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

³⁴Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 26.

³⁵Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* 27.

³⁶Angela Y. Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2010), 16.

³⁷Sylvia Wynter. “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues.” *Forum NHI: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1 (1994): 42–71, 69.

³⁸Denise Ferreira da Silva. “On Difference Without Separability.” In: Jochen Volz, Rjielle Isabella, and Júlia Rebouças, eds. *Incerteza Viva: 32nd Bienal De São Paulo: 7 September–December 11, 2016*. (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016), 57–65.